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Control of Federal Publications

Hearings have begun this month on H.R. 4572. In its present form, this bill (designed to revise Title 44 of the U.S. Code) would place government scientific and technical publications under the control of a politically appointed board. The bill should be amended to provide more safeguards for a process that is essential to the free flow of information in our society. Scientists and educators throughout the nation should examine this issue promptly and thoroughly.

Title 44 of the U.S. Code places primary responsibility for developing and administering policy for the printing and distribution of all government publications with the Joint Committee on Printing. The power of this statute has, in fact, been delegated (or relegated) to the staff of the Committee. It also defines the mission of the Government Printing Office (GPO) as that of providing all branches of government with printing, binding, and distribution services. The distribution function is managed by the office of the Superintendent of Documents, which operates 26 bookstores, a subscription and mail-order sales service, and a depository library and free distribution program.

Despite inefficiencies, this system has worked. One reason is that the executive agencies of government, in special situations and with Joint Committee approval, have developed their own printing and distribution mechanisms to serve the needs of their own constituencies.

In hearings that were held quietly in 1978, an Ad Hoc Advisory Committee reviewed the federal government's printing and distribution program. The hearings and the report* that ensued were soon followed by the introduction of H.R. 4572 to revise Title 44. If this bill were enacted into law, a powerful government monopoly could control the printing and distribution of all government and public documents. The bill would create a presidentially appointed seven-member board of directors, who would be responsible for developing and implementing a central, comprehensive, and unified policy for printing and distributing government publications. Four voting members would be chosen from the printing and reproduction industries, organized labor, the library community, and the information industries and three nonvoting members would represent the House, the Senate, and the Office of Management and Budget. No representation from science, education, or the humanities is suggested. The chairman of the board would have total authority to regulate the distribution of all government information, whether in printed, audiovisual, or machine-readable form, and to decide issues that are appealed. The board would control the GPO through its regulations. It would appoint two general managers: a Public Printer and a Superintendent of Documents. The interests of Congress would be protected by having its printing come under the jurisdiction of the House Administration and Senate Rules committees.

The proposed system would place executive agencies at the mercy of the politically appointed board members, whose regulation of the GPO would, in effect, give them control over all government publications. The National Technical Information Service of the Department of Commerce, which distributes government or public technical reports and documents on a self-sustaining basis, would be threatened by the proposed new system.

This control would extend to publications resulting from any research supported by a federal grant or contract. The provisions could be interpreted in such a way that board approval would be required for the use of grant funds to pay page charges. The public interest will not be well served if the executive agencies of government are compelled to seek the approval of a small but powerful board for the printing and distribution of documents and other informational materials related to the agencies' business.

—MARTIN M. CUMMINGS

*Federal Government Printing and Publishing: Policy Issues. Report of the Ad Hoc Advisory Committee on Revision of Title 44 to the Joint Committee on Printing, United States Congress (Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1979).